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The Study of History

By WALTER P. BECKWITH, *Salem, Mass.*





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THE STUDY OF HISTORY

THE value of the study of history depends upon man's perception of and belief in what we speak of as the uniformity of nature, the existence of the principle of causation as a permanent force, the fact that like causes produce like effects. This generalization includes the spiritual as well as the physical life. Its application is to the subjective as well as the objective phase of universal experience. It recognizes what Emerson calls the "one mind common to all individual men." The higher life is always conditioned upon the lower, so that the study of spiritual experience loses much of its value unless it is based upon material conditions and physical phenomena. It must also recognize the fact that the human mind uses the body as its instrument and that so far as our actual experience goes, we have no knowledge of any other means by which it may express itself. The appreciation of this relationship is indispensable to a sound view of the processes of education, considered in the larger sense. Upon it also depends the development of all the activities that are rational and wise in so connecting the past with the future in our thought that the lessons of the former may produce their due effect and yield their due results in the life of the latter. Human life in the spiritual aspect is not less an evolution than in the physical. We must learn not merely to accept this fact in its formal sense but also to apply it in good faith and in full reality to the problems of life.

There is no personal element in the government of the spiritual realm any more than in the physical world. What we call moral laws are no less fixed and unchangeable than those which we designate as physical. This is a necessity of the unity of the

divine order. It is not, then, the laws that are the result of evolution, but it is man's recognition of them that is progressive. The laws of the spiritual world have existed from the beginning,—if there was a beginning; the principles of activity, of industry, of order, of righteousness have been “from everlasting” and they will continue “to everlasting;” they are immutable,—not made for man and imposed upon him by arbitrary authority, but existing in man,—a necessary and inseparable element,—consequent upon as well as consistent with the nature and organization of the universe. Man's recognition of the laws of spiritual life constitutes a revelation in no special and peculiar sense. He has made some progress in learning them and in adapting himself to them, as he has in the physical world, but the progress in the two fields is made in precisely the same manner and according to the same promptings of inquiry and aspiration. What we call revelation is simply a recognition of a process that has always had a genuine existence. The divine order is constantly expressing itself through the operation of its laws in both the spiritual and the physical worlds, and through man's growing understanding and appreciation of such expressions, we may most devoutly say that God is being revealed.

It is with this fact in mind that one should attempt to approach the consideration of the study of history. If man today values this study at a higher estimate than did his predecessors, it is because he understands better than they did, that human nature, in its fundamental aspects, is unchangeable; that the aspirations and ambitions which move great men,—so-called,—also move those of humbler endowment; that the motives which govern great interests are identical with those which guide petty affairs; that the history of a neighborhood is the history of a nation. The men who are selfish and grasping in the small life of a country town, or public-spirited and generous in their attitude towards the problems of a sparsely settled community would be petty or great in the

same way if they were called to rule the destinies of a great nation. The differences exist in degree only, not in kind. The man whose greatness or littleness becomes conspicuous is the same in his essential quality with him whose sweetness,—or bitterness,—is wasted on the desert air.

If these things are so, we have full warrant for studying and heeding the lessons of experience. It may even come to pass that the limited lessons of a narrow experience may train one well for solving the problems of greatest moment. Sir Isaac Newton made the greatest discovery of many centuries from pondering over the fall of a little apple.

In the light of such considerations, it is our purpose to consider the subject now presented to our attention. If it appears to be the fact that the discussion is colored or affected by the nature of our daily duties, perhaps no apology is necessary. The men who can discuss any matter without being influenced by the considerations springing from their own familiar and habitual thought are not so numerous that there can be many to criticise another for yielding to the temptation. And, besides, the teachers who would gain even an approximate understanding of the problems of education cannot fail soon to realize their far-reaching importance. The task of training a generation to take up the world's work is so momentous, its consequences so far-reaching, and its methods and agencies so potent for good or for evil that it is not lightly to be estimated. The questions it raises are not all settled in the school room ; the answers it finally makes are given in every relation of human life. The different branches of knowledge to be selected for school work, the proportion in which they are to be used, and the methods and special aims to be adopted or encouraged in their employment,— these are not the least important of the special problems of the formal process of education. While such matters seem to be determined by teachers, it must be remembered that in reality every nation has such schools and such

aims and methods of instruction as it desires. So whatever affects the estimate in which the intelligent people of any community hold any branch of knowledge must sooner or later find expression in the schools, and the effort to contribute to a right understanding of the value of the different branches is praiseworthy and desirable.

All branches of knowledge may be estimated from at least two different points of view. For our present purpose we may characterize these as the conventional or practical and the educational. We assume that the educated man is not merely an intelligent man. Education implies something more than and something different from mere intelligence. One may have a vast store of knowledge and of information and yet possess no sound claim as an "educated" man. James Russell Lowell once characterized Abraham Lincoln as the best educated man of his time. If education merely signified the possession of intelligence, the characterization would have been absurd. It is indeed through the acquisition of knowledge of some kind or degree that a man becomes educated, but the process is far more important than the material employed, and the least tangible of all the products is the greatest. The analogy between spiritual and physical growth is close enough to be useful. No one becomes an athlete merely by eating a certain number of pounds of good roast beef with the usual concomitants. The original endowment of organs is a factor; something depends upon the kinds of food selected; much upon the training to which the candidate is subjected. Muscle and skill are the net result. So in the spiritual development, objects and subjects of knowledge play the part the food plays in the physical life, but the acquisition of knowledge, in the true view, is only a means to an end, and the power that comes as the result of the rational exercise of our mental faculties is the real end, the goal of the educative process. And power may be attained with a comparatively limited amount and variety of

knowledge, provided it be wisely employed, as Lincoln and many others have fully exemplified.

It seems to follow, therefore, that much knowledge, rated very high from the conventional stand-point, may have relatively little value in the development of intellectual ability or power. The material to be employed in the formal educative process,—as in schools, usually possesses both these elements of value, but the proportion in which they are mingled often varies greatly. The schools may, perhaps, fairly be asked to concern themselves with some things chiefly for their conventional value,—like the spelling of English words or the tables of weights and measures, either of which does very little to develop genuine power,—simply because, all things considered, it is desirable that children should have such things well within their command. It would, however, be a great misfortune to real education if such a standard should be universally or even very prominently applied.

On the other hand, purely educational material,—if there were such,—would put school-life out of touch with the other aspects of life. It would also be found probably deficient in those qualities which are effective in exciting and maintaining the interest, especially of young pupils, in their daily work. This result would follow from its deficiency in those individual and concrete elements which are best adapted to appeal to the activities of children.

Those who plan the work of the schools are bound to seek a due admixture of the conventional and the educational elements in the work which they select. There may be a preponderance of one or the other in each line of work separately considered ; but the general result should be the reasonable balance which has been mentioned.

In history,—more, perhaps, than in most school work,—the desirable proportions of the two qualities may be found. But this will not be attained unless the study is planned and carried out

in the right manner. For in history it is easy to magnify the one side or the other so that in given instances it often falls far short, on one side or the other, of its best possibilities. The greater danger, however, lies in the neglect of the educational value through exalting the other. This, too, is the error more likely to result,—especially when the work is done by inexperienced or superficially prepared teachers. These may not realize the fact that history is more than a mere chronicle of unrelated and distinct events, each tagged with a date which, to the child, is purely arbitrary and meaningless. Such a teacher, either in arranging independently a plan of work, or even in carrying out a plan which has been framed with greater wisdom, will seek,—almost unconsciously—such results as can be most easily tested by certain kinds of examinations largely in vogue whose aim is to reduce to a scale of percents the results of the pupils' work. Such examinations are not wholly unknown even at the doors of the college, and they revel in a multiplicity of minute and trivial questions which, whether so intended or not, in fact train chiefly the lower and simpler forms of memory, dealing with dates, places, and other details which are really insignificant. The importance of memory,—even of a good verbal memory,—need not be questioned. It is particularly prominent during the grammar-school period,—the very time when history is first studied in anything approaching consistent and connected form. There is at that time serious danger that by such work so much importance may be attached to it that the child may become a victim of arrested development, with a strong, if not unconquerable tendency to use it instead of being trained and habituated to the use of the reason and the imagination,—faculties which should be receiving much strenuous encouragement to an increasing employment.

In the beginnings of the child's school life the study of history, for its conventional value, rightly has a large place. That kind of work is adapted to the powers of the child in that period,

when the senses are relatively most active and reason has comparatively little to do. It will then take the form of stories,—anecdotes of great men, especially in their childhood, myths and legends, and accounts of separate instances of noble deeds and splendid virtues. It will be connected with the preparatory work in geography and will deal with the life of children in other times and in other lands. It will not be history, in any scientific and systematic sense, but it will present elements of history, which later may be expected to take their places in a more complete and systematic scheme. This knowledge will bear to history the same relation as concrete facts, early acquired, regarding plants, are later seen to bear to the science of botany, or as the facts of numbers are, by gradual transition, later understood as arithmetic.

But this kind of historical study, suitable for the primary school period, becomes largely useless,—it may even be worse than useless,—if it is continued, differing only in amount, throughout the grammar school. It is, indeed, too much to expect that children in the grammar school should have what adults regard as a comprehensive view of history in general, or of the history of one country, or even of a single epoch. The later grammar school age is a period of transition, both physical and spiritual, and the child's experience with history should not differ materially from his experience with other branches of knowledge and in his physical life. But the point is that the work in history must be adapted to the process of transition. Without neglecting what he has already acquired, close watch must constantly be kept on the possibilities of his future. Memory gives us no new knowledge,—all that can be expected of it is that it retain what we have acquired through other faculties;—the reason and the imagination are dependent upon it, but it must not be made their substitute or rival. It is also to be kept in mind that the power of reasoning is not an additional faculty which comes into existence, full fledged and omnipresent, at a certain fixed period.

Even the young child reasons, but reason is not his characteristic activity. The development of the power of reasoning must be gradual, but it must not be neglected; it needs stimulating and directing, even more than sense-activity and memory; if it is not properly stimulated and directed at the right time it is extremely likely to fall short of its appropriate growth, and when the period suitable to its growth in a marked degree is neglected, it is difficult, if not impossible, later to supply the omission and make good the lost ground.

The right growth of the reasoning power cannot be secured through the study of history for its conventional value. If the memory alone is relied upon, memory alone will be strengthened. The question, therefore, is a most important one, what features in the study are necessary in order to realize the educational value. Good instruction, at the period when the higher powers of the mind are coming into use and prominence in an increasing degree, always has for its goal the mastery of what is general and abstract, through a study of what is individual and concrete. History is no exception to the principle. It may readily be made to present problems for consideration and answer which call for the exercise of other faculties than the senses and memory, though these must obtain and preserve the materials for such work. It is a great mistake to suppose that only the mathematics have problems which call for original effort in their solution. The problems in all departments must of course be carefully selected, and graded to the power which the pupils are capable of exerting. Some of them are connected closely with other branches of school work and thus are valuable for other reasons than their merely historical significance. It is not unreasonable to require pupils in the upper grammar grades, and in any of the high school classes, to grapple profitably and with a reasonable degree of success, with some or all of those which will now be suggested.

For instance, compare the Salem of today with the Salem

which Washington saw when he visited this city. Comparison is the very essence of thought ; these comparisons may take many different lines,—they may deal with the streets, the dwellings, the means of travel and communication, the conveniences of life, such as water-supply, sewerage, street lighting, and preservation of order ; they may consider the dress, the food, the household utensils, the schools, and the occupations of the people. Such a comparison, made with reference to Salem, is of much wider application, and should serve immensely to help the young of to-day to realize the manners of life among their ancestors. Thus they would understand, as they never would understand otherwise, the vast differences which a century has made. We can do this only by putting ourselves into the places of our predecessors,—then we know and appreciate the motives by which they were influenced and comprehend the identity and consistency of the universal mind.

For another illustration of the same kind,—compare the life of a Puritan boy with the life of a boy of to-day. For a broader and more difficult problem, compare Virginia and Massachusetts life of the seventeenth century. The ever present “Why?” and the insistence upon a reason, however crude it may be and however imperfectly considered, for the answers given would emphasize to the minds of the pupils the fact that, from this point of view, history is a real thought-study,—that is, a study which gives the materials for thought, and not merely one which stimulates the verbal memory.

These problems deal with ideas of things that are largely concrete. Others, more general and abstract, should find places. For example,—

Why did Salem lose that commercial supremacy which she once held?

We honor the name and memory of Nathan Hale—is not Major Andre entitled to equal honor? If not, why not?

What circumstances, if any, justified the early settlers in not allowing that religious liberty upon which we pride ourselves?

Why did the Northern states so easily give up the holding of slaves?

Why did the French succeed so much better than the English in securing and holding the friendship of the Indians?

How did the cotton-gin strengthen the hold of the institution of slavery upon the industrial and financial interests of the country?

Why was the fall of Quebec in 1759 a very important event?

The reasons for and against the expulsion of the Acadians by the English.

The arguments of the Tories against the American Revolution.

It is far from the present purpose to degrade or belittle the possession of mere intelligence in regard to history,—especially the history of one's own country. Simply to know something of events, and even something of dates, apart from their higher aspects, is an achievement of conventional value not to be despised. There are instances of ignorance not to be pardoned, and certain events and dates are doubtless to be classed among them. But it is to be observed that such achievements are only the elements of historical knowledge, and that, if the higher purposes are faithfully served, the lower will of necessity be attained. For one cannot think and reason upon things unless he is furnished with the knowledge of them. The contention is that both teachers and pupils are often too easily satisfied with the lower and too readily persuaded to neglect the higher.

In such study as has been imperfectly and briefly indicated, there are, it is believed, the possibilities of great usefulness from the standpoint of mental growth,—to say nothing of its value in the inculcation of intelligent and reasonable patriotism and of inclusive and broadening human sympathy. Some of the particu-

lars in which such study has specific educational value may properly be indicated.

In the first place, the power of reasoning is directly promoted. And the particular variety of reasoning which is developed is of the utmost practical value. There are two kinds of certainty given us by reasoning,—designated in logic as mathematical and practical. In mathematical reasoning we start with hypothetical premises and arrive at an absolutely perfect demonstration of certain conclusions. Such are the conditions and the results of the pure mathematics, but the conditions with which the pure mathematics start, and the results at which they arrive are not the conditions and the results of ordinary human experience. It may well be doubted whether skill in carrying on such processes necessarily prepares men to meet the problems of actual life. Rather, instead, in actual life, it is the problems whose conditions can be only imperfectly or approximately determined that are encountered, and the utmost to be expected as the result of reasoning processes, is probable or practical certainty. These are precisely the problems with which history deals, and the child or youth who is encouraged to weigh the reasons for and against such an historical event as the expulsion of Roger Williams or the annexation of Texas is being trained to exactly such processes as will be useful to him in his future life. A greater or less degree of practical certainty is all that anybody can hope to reach when, at some crisis, more or less important, he is compelled to make a choice between two different courses of action. In forming opinions upon current events, and even in the administration of justice, absolute mathematical certainty is impracticable of attainment. To a right estimate of the balance of favorable and adverse considerations and the consequent ability to decide which preponderates, such a study of history as has been described cannot fail directly to contribute.

Secondly, there is no better means of promoting, in a ration-

al and natural manner, the exercise of the imagination. This will be the case whether we regard the imagination from that point of view which makes it the efficient helper of the memory by fixing clearly and vividly in the mind the products of sense-perception, and of forming accurate and well-defined images from the oral or written language of others, or whether we consider it in its creative or original power as the ability to form new products from the materials already existing in the mind.

The imagination is stimulated in the acts first mentioned when the objects used by other generations or other peoples, in our own or other times, are presented to the senses. Here is an objective aid in the work of historical study which is seldom used as it might be used. Yet, upon its efficacy depends the justification and the value of collections of antiquities and the contemporary properties which have played their part for others than ourselves, of maps, pictures, historical memorials like buildings, statues and tablets, of our visitations to the scenes of great events, of our efforts to put ourselves and our pupils in the places of those who have acted parts in the great drama of human life. Just in proportion as we see these objects and these places with the eye of a clear and intelligent imagination do they perform their office; and, in this as in other respects, power is increased by the appropriate exercise of the mental faculties. Then, how often we fail in our reading or in our listening because we are unable to image to ourselves what is set forth by voice or printed page. It is not alone to the ability to understand what is embraced in a narrative that the cultivation of this power extends. Our appreciation and enjoyment of art in every variety,—of form, of color, of proportion, of sound, of language,—are dependent upon our ability to exercise, along with sense-perception, the imaging power.

If this advantage accrues to imagination in its receptive sense from historical study, how much more is it true that the same fortunate result follows when we consider its power of original pro-

duction,—in the shape of new combinations of materials already existing in the mind, of exaggerating or minimizing those elements, or of modifying as we will the spiritual qualities of man. To the statesman, intent upon the organization of a new nation or of the formulation of an important policy, and to the humble, patriotic citizen, eager to form for himself the true ideal of his conduct in its relations to his country, what can be more necessary, more useful more sympathetic and helpful, than the rational study of history? “Of the universal mind,” says Emerson, “each individual man is one more incarnation. All its properties consist in him. Each new fact in his private experience flashes a light on what great bodies of men have done, and the crises of his life refers to national crises.”

It would be unfortunate to leave even by silence, any justification for the inference that this discussion of the methods and value of historical study concerns only school work. The work of the school is not an end in itself. It should be so planned and carried out as to connect as closely and efficiently as possible with subsequent activity. So far as possible the motives of that period should be such as may be carried over into the experiences of what is called “life.” School is a phase of life,—not merely a “preparation for life.” It is a great misfortune for a child to feel that when he leaves school he must begin to accept, suddenly and for the first time, his legitimate responsibilities. The feeling of responsibility should be a gradual growth; if this view is accepted, that unnatural attitude towards school and teachers which is too often observed would be, in a large degree, avoided. If the child and his parents, as well as the teacher, realize that school is for the pupil, that it is to the pupil a part of his real life, the gains would be great and the relations between the school and the home would be vastly improved.

The view of the value and the methods of historical study which has been set forth would contribute in a large degree to the

promotion of a rational and reasonable relation of the two important parties concerned in the problem of education. The youth, whose study of history has been of such a kind as to give him a right attitude towards his future reading, would find, on leaving school, such a result to be of high practical value. That reading should be a part of one's search after truth,—the highest and noblest employment of the human mind. To divest one's self of an unfounded prejudice, to be guided by an earnest and candid petty desire to learn what is really true of the past, to feel keenly the desire to be guided by the lessons of the world's actual experience, to determine to know and to admit the fair balance of testimony as to the facts and the merits of disputed questions,—are not these results highly desirable for very many reasons, and would they not contribute most powerfully to the furtherance of such a spirit of candor and of high thinking as would become the citizens of a free country?

The schools can do much, and they ought to do much to promote such ends. They can render no greater service to the future generations. But they can only set the feet of the pupils in the right road, and unless the lessons are so thoroughly taught that in after life, the kind of reading or study they have promoted is continued, their efforts will have been made largely in vain. To read history in or out of school merely for the temporary excitement of the story, or with such preconceived opinions or feelings regarding any historical events as to close one's mind to the full evidence concerning them, is to destroy its value as a guide to human conduct. The attentive mind is not more essential than the open mind; intense application is less valuable than genuine candor,—it is only through a co-ordination of the two elements that the result will be of the kind which will in reality make the past the servant and the lamp of the future.

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